

Castle Eve

BY DR. F. R. WALSH

THE earliest available reference to Castle Eve occurs in 1210, when William Fitzgeoffrey, in confirmation of the Charter of Kells, grants to his burgesses "Commons of my woods towards making their buildings and towards their fires in my woods on the East of my lands of Evvena and as far as the lands of Erley." Evvena mentioned is Castle Eve. William Maillard, who gave his name to Mallards-town, was one of the witnesses. Previous to this, Castle Eve was part of an extensive but vaguely defined area, named Coilleach. It was densely wooded—hence the name Coilleach—which means a wooded place. The name is still preserved in the original as Coolagh and Coolaghmore, which formed part of this territory.

Some time between 1205—1213 a New Settlement or New Town was established here—a grant of the lands being made to John of Erley—so called from his manor of Erley in Berkshire from whence he came. The earliest record of John of Erley appears in the Ormonde Deeds (No. 31 of Curtis) in which he is a witness of the Grant by William the Marshal to Theobald Walter and his heirs of the Vill of Arklow and the Castle there by the service of one Knight, etc. — the date before 1205.

Castle Eve is said to be so named from some lady named Eve or Eva; no writer appears to suggest her identity. Before the arrival of John of Erley, Kells had already been granted to Geoffrey Fitzrobert; his territory extended, in part, to Castle Eve. It is, I suggest, likely that the Eva or Castle Eve was Eva de Birmingham, the wife of Geoffrey, and the first lady of the Settlement.

The Erley succession continued for a century and a half until about 1370, by which time Erleyston or Earlstown was the accepted English name. It is now in use as the name of the electoral division and includes Newtown, Castle Eve, Killyvellen, Ovenstown and Cronogue.

The Erleys might be described as absentee landlords; they continued to hold important posts under the Crown in England, making occasional visits to the Manor of Erley—or Castle Eve Castle, as we know it. The Parish Church of Earlstown, still in fair preservation, belongs, according to Carrigan, to this period, and contains at least one 13th century monument.

The last member of this family to hold Erleyston was also named John. In 1367 he went with the Army of the Black Prince—eldest son of Edward the Third—to Spain in an attempt made to restore Pedro the Cruel to the Spanish Throne. He was wounded and taken prisoner; his release had to be purchased at a heavy cost. To meet this, the Manor of Earleston was sold, so ending the first of the Lords of Erley.

Within a decade—the precise date is uncertain—the Manor had been made over to John Sweetman. Contrary to Burthchaell's statement that he was the first Sweetman mentioned in Co. Kilkenny, the name was probably common in Co. Kilkenny for at least a century previously. Estreats of Co. Kilkenny (1325-6) (Ormonde Deeds) mention Gilbert Sweetman, and Sibilla Sweetman; Robert Sweetman is a witness in various deeds and grants in the years 1316 and 1319—two of these being signed in Knocktopher (Ormonde Deeds, Curtis). The Sweetmans were probably of Danish or Old Irish origin. In addition to the Manor of Erley (i.e. Castle Eve) they also possessed and probably built Newtown Castle; it is still in excellent repair (dating from about 1500).

The Sweetmans assumed the title of Barons of Erley; they continued in unbroken succession until Cromwellian confiscations. William Sweetman, "the last of the Barons," forfeited in 1653, and was transplanted. At the time of the forfeiture, the estate contained 1,117 acres, plantation measure. His eldest son, John, was the owner of Rathculbin and Spruce's Hays—still called locally by its Irish name, Gorrheenansproosh. He, too, forfeited 475 plantation acres, and was transplanted.

Following the forfeiture, the manor was divided. The largest portion went to Captain Henry Baker, "in satisfaction of £479 13s. 4d. for his service in England promiscuously with the arrears of his service in Ireland in the town and lands of Castleiff and Newtown, etc." He was elected M.P. for Callan in 1661 in the post-Restoration Parliament. He died in 1662. He left four sons and three daughters. His eldest son, John, sold part of his inheritance to Richard, Shee of Sheestown; Patrick Walsh, Killiney, purchased another portion, thus giving rise to the present-day divisions of Newtown Baker, Newtown Shee, and Newtown Walsh. Other portions of the Manor went to William Baxter, Wm. Bradley and the Earl of Ranelagh.

Rathculbin and Spruces Hays, the property of John Sweetman, was given to Colonel Daniel Axtell. Axtell had been appointed Governor of Kilkenny by Cromwell and had an unenviable reputation for brutality. A long list of massacres and murders were attributed to him, only one which I will mention, quoted from Clarendon's History of the Irish Rebellion: "1650—Col. Axtell hanged 50 of the inhabitants of Thomastown under his protection, for no other reason but that a party of Cromwell's army was defeated the day before in that place by some of the Royalists."

He was in command of the troops at the trial and execution of Charles I. For his part in this, he was executed at Tyburn in 1660. Rathculbin and Spruces Hays were purchased by the Lord Chancellor of Ireland, Sir Richard Cox, in 1703. He died in 1733.

I have been asked to refer to the reputed association of the Prim family with Castle Eve. It seems there is some old tradition that they were at an early period in possession of Castle Eve, though I have been unable to locate any reference except a strongly negative one which I will quote from the original (of Burtchaell).

"In a paper entitled 'The Prims of Johnswell, an Episode of the Irish Wars,' by W. O. Cavenagh (The Genealogical Magazine, Vol. II, page 91), it is stated that Colonel John Prim, sent to Ireland as Chief Engineer during the

Administration of Stratford (sic.) 'purchased an estate in Co. Kilkenny between Callan and Wells (sic) where he built himself a residence on an island in the King's River to which he gave the name of Castle Eve, the remains of which are still to be seen.'" No such "Colonel" is known to have existed, and his purchase and building of Castle Eve are as mythical as himself. The first of the Prim family known to have settled in Co. Kilkenny was Abraham Prim, who paid 2s. hearth money for a house at Buollicomin (Ballycommon) Parish of Rower, 1664.

It may be of some interest to know that there is a tombstone in Kells burial ground with the following inscription: "Erected by Mrs. Margaret Brennan in memory of her mother, Mrs. Jane Cole, daughter of John Prim, Johnswell, 1804." Other Prim tombstones of the same period are also there.

There is very little local tradition about Newtown Castle—the existence of an underground passage to Kells Priory is mentioned. The Castle of Castle Eve is believed to have been battered and taken by Cromwell's troops. There is good reason to accept this. Cromwell's personal despatch to the Parliament after the fall of Callan, states: "From hence Colonel Reynolds was sent with his regiment to remove a garrison of the enemy's from Knocktopher (being the way of our communication to Ross), which, accordingly, he did." This march would take his troops quite close to Castle Eve, and there can be little doubt that he captured and began the destruction of the building.

Little over half a century ago an attempt to cultivate a field adjoining the Castle was given up as large quantities of human bones were unearthed. These were believed to be those of the defenders, all of whom, except one, were killed. Tradition has it that he was made to take down and transport the heavy gates at the drawbridge; these were taken to Kilkenny gaol where they were erected and used in the many hangings that were carried out there. The gaol of that period was, of course, Grace's Old Castle—the site of the present Courthouse.



INTERESTING RELIC

An interesting relic of the past should be referred to—an inscribed stone marking the boundary between the lands of the Barons of Erley and the Priory lands of Kells. It is still to be seen in its original position on the boundary stile between Mr. Hutchinson's farm at Killiney and Mr. Gorey's farm at Newtown—not far from the King's River. The inscription, in raised letters on a rough-hewn rock, reads:

Predium of Kells
Baron of Erlu

Predium is the Latin for farm. The upper line is reversed. The type of lettering is in old English characters and suggests early 16th century as the date—before the dissolution of Kells Priory in 1540.

I am much indebted to Mrs. Donovan of Castle Eve for a lot of information about her home in Castle Eve. She has a splendid memory—and a keen interest in the history of the place. This is what we would expect, as she is niece of the historian, to whom we are all so very much indebted, Canon Carrigan.